



MINDFUL IN MAY

Dr. Elise Bialylew, founder of Mindful in May (mindfulinmay.org) and The Mind Life Project (www.mindlifeproject.com) and author of The Happiness Plan, interviews Bhante Buddharakkhita

*Bhante Buddharakkhita was born and raised in Uganda, Africa. He first encountered Buddhism in 1990 while living in India, and he began practising meditation in 1993. He was ordained as a Buddhist monk in 2002 and then he spent eight years under the guidance of Bhante Gunaratana at the Bhavana Society. He is the Founder Uganda Buddhist Center in Uganda. He is on the Council of Spiritual advisors to the Global Buddhist Relief, New Jersey. Bhante has been teaching meditation in Africa, Australia, Europe and U.S, since 2005. His book, *planting Dhamma Seeds: The Emergence of Buddhism in Africa*, tells the story of religious and spiritual work in Africa.*

Elise: So Bhante, welcome to the program. Before we formally started this conversation, you and I had a little mindful technology meditation to settle ourselves after a bit of navigating technology between Uganda and Australia. So, I think we're both ready for the conversation.

Bhante: I'm very ready, Elise

Elise: So, thank you so much. And I'm really looking forward to this because I think you bring a very unique perspective to mindfulness and meditation. But to begin with, I would love for you to share with the listeners - you know people arrive at meditation for all different reasons, a lot of it suffering - but how did you come to meditation yourself?

Bhante: Well, precisely the reason why I came to meditation is also suffering. Looking at the background of where I was prior to my meditation, I can see I had some issues already. My father died in 1987 and that time I was still in Uganda and I left Uganda in 1990. That's almost three years. So, I had already felt a void, a vacuum with the absence of my father. And also, I was in what we call Advanced level or A/Levels. So that's a very tough time, pre university. I mean, it's a lot of studies that you have to do A-levels before you go to university. So, there was a lot of stress. And then when I went to India, I was in a new country, you know, so it was stressful; nineteen eighty-seven, the death of my father, and then me being in high school doing my A-levels, and now going into a new country where I don't have a relative.

Elise: How did you end up... tell us what was the leap from Uganda to India? Just fill that in for us.

Bhante: Yes, actually, I got what we call as a scholarship. It was an exchange program and it came through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Uganda. So, I had my Aunt working there and she told me that there was a scholarship to study in India, and asked me if I was interested to go to India and study business. I said, "Wow, that's great." So, then I signed the papers and then I went to India as an exchange student and the government of India was paying for my studies at the university. So, when I went there and it was in June, the hottest month of India, I was sweating like a pig.

I mean, Uganda is not very hot, actually. People think Africa is very hot. Uganda has the best weather like it is about twenty-six Degree Celsius and it goes to sixteen. Where I am, it's about 23, and so, it's very beautiful weather. When I went to India, it was 41 degree Celsius. It was so hot. So, the weather was hot, the food was hot, the people were hot, because when they saw this African, I mean, they were just looking and all the eyes were like popping out of their head, you know? So, I was having issues in India because this was my first time to fly out of the country and I never got out of Uganda. So, it was a new experience for me, and it was very stressful. And when I went to the university, they had a strike for two months. So that means I could not begin my studies. So about that time I started to question many things in my life. Actually, I remember very well, that year in 1990, I woke up in the middle of the night and cried - that was before I became a monk.

When my father died, actually I never cried, but the memories, the tough time I was going through, I woke up at midnight in a new country and I cried. I wanted to get out of the place. You know, the food was too hot for me. I never eat hot food. And actually, I was suffering a lot when I came to meditation. I wanted to release the tension, to relieve the stress. So that's why I think when I went to the university in India, I saw monks who were more peaceful and then that attracted me because they were just so calm and peaceful. But for me, I had inner turmoil inside. So, then I started associating with these monks and they told me about Buddhism, but they never taught me.

My association showed me that there was something inside these monks. So, then I saw a man walking, our neighbour walking slowly and quietly and calm, and I asked him, "Where do you go in the evening? I always see you go in the evening, where do you go?" He told me he went to meditation. So then when I went to meditate, long story short, I felt so calm. So, I came and shared my experience with the monks and they told that it was good to meditate, but that I should do Buddhist meditation because the other one was Brahma kumaris which is the Hindu meditation. So that's why really, I come to meditation because there was a lot of suffering inside me. And when I started meditating, I felt that sense of calm.

Elise: That's interesting because I think for a lot of people, maybe even myself included, I had an intuition that meditation would be useful. But actually, when I sat to meditate initially, it wasn't calm. I was really... it didn't actually feel good, maybe straight away. But for you actually, it was like when you met meditation, it was quite calming straight away, you had that sense of calm, which for a lot of people doesn't happen. They sit there and then they actually discover that the mind is crazy and it's quite restless and it's agitating. And when's the bell going to ring, you know?

Bhante: Yes, actually you're right! For me when I sat there, I think that I had too much suffering and when I sat there, what they were teaching was a kind of meditation. We would sit there in a dark room and there was this red light where you focus on the red light. And this is in front of you. In the meditation hall was a kind of a blob with the red light beaming like this.

And they would say close your eyes and it was more what you call Shamatha, calming meditation. I think that's what hit me. But I'm telling you, after that, when I went to other meditations, the mind was like that, of course. But it was like the first time I turned the key, I felt like I was going through too much stress, and then the introduction was more calming. Of course, there were thoughts all over, but at the end of the meditation, I felt calm. I would say that I didn't feel the same way that I entered that meditation hall.

Elise: That makes sense, that's interesting. I wanted to ask you, lots of people might come to meditation, but not everyone decides to become a monk. So you shared with me in the previous conversation, which I found really fascinating, that your life was moving in a particular direction. There was sort of expectations from your family, your culture, and then you it sounds like you were really out in the world travelling, exploring, living a specific life, and then you actually decided to become a monk. Can you speak to us about that decision and what your life looked like and how you ended up becoming a monk?

Bhante: You see my friend, of course I was in India in 1990 and started learning meditation slowly, slowly in 1993. In 1994, I went for a retreat, which was 12 days. I did my first retreat in 1994 in Dharamsala for 10 days. And again, the mind was all over the place, and I was still seeking that peace, that I got when I first started meditation which was not a retreat, but this was a retreat. And then I got enough stress and now I'm in a retreat for 12 days in Dharamsala, a quiet place. So now what happened is, I got to know from meditation, that this is of course a religion which is called Buddhism. I met His Holiness the Dalai Lama and I saw this human being was so peaceful, a monk. For me, actually, when I saw different kind of monks, the first monks I met were at the university and they left for Thailand and then there were no monks. So, I started looking for monks, and I got to know his Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan community in India. So, I got to know the lifestyle of monks, right, but I was still a layman and that's not what I intended, to become a monk, basically I wanted to learned meditation, I just wanted to really be a Buddhist, and I just wanted to be meditator, that's it. So now, of course, I left the India after seeing the Dalai Lama - I had a private audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and he inspired me a lot. So, I said, I have to go to Tibet. So, I went from India

to Tibet and I stayed with monks and thought, well, these are very peaceful people.

I stayed there for one month and a half in Tibet, in Lhasa and different mountains, and I went to caves and I got lost. Basically, I was associated with the monks, but I still didn't really do the job of becoming a monk. So, then I would spend more time in Thailand as a scuba diver. I really tried to find a living, because my family had really literally disowned me. Of course, there was no internet and phones were expensive, and they got to learn that I'm a Buddhist, so, I knew that they were not very happy about it. So basically, there was a long spell when I wasn't in touch with my parents, but I knew they weren't happy with me.

So, I got a job as a scuba diving instructor, first as a dive master and then as an instructor. I was living on a beach with a friend of mine from Australia. I remember very well we were working together and I enjoyed life, I'm telling you. Life at any resort, and this resort was one of the best one in Thailand. And I lived there for two years. It was amazing. By the time I left Tibet, I had gone to so many monasteries that I didn't want to go to the monastery. So, I did my best to keep away from monasteries. I just started enjoying my life, basically having the best food in the resort, the best days, best friends coming from all over the world. I taught people from all over the world and I had so many friends, over 5000 friends, because every time I taught these people, we became friends.

But actually, what happened was whenever they left, they went with my heart. Every time when I established friends they had to leave because this was a very expensive island, they couldn't stay more than two weeks. And they used to admire me, "Oh you're an African diver, you are very lucky. your office in front of this beach is so beautiful." So, they used to admire me, but for me I said, "Well, it is what it is." Now what really made me find out the path to where I am now was to start to see the vacuum inside me, the hole that was there with all this, the food and friends and so on.

I felt I had something inside me that it was like a vacuum that could not be filled, with external things, you know. I had meditated in 1994, and here we are in 1997. So, as I was saying, there's more to life than really having good food and meditating and good friends. But still earning

money and enjoying life was holding me, you know. I left Thailand and went back to Uganda and of course, I was disillusioned by all of this - with the modern life and all of this. I was disillusioned. That's why I left the island, the resort and people, and my divemaster, my teacher told me that I must be crazy to leave this life. And then I left Thailand and went back to Uganda. I went to Uganda with the scuba gear and the Buddhist books, and when I reached Uganda, I wanted to see my mother and my family after seven years.

I'm telling you, my friend, I was disillusioned when I came to Uganda because nobody could understand me. I had a shaved head, I was not a business man no business- I was expected to be very prosperous. I was living a simple life. I had done yoga in India and I was really coming into the life that I felt satisfied with, you know, inside me because I was meditating now. When I couldn't fit into Uganda, then I left for South America. That's cutting a long story short. So, then I ended up at a meditation retreat at **IMS** because I knew that you could meditate for three months at IMS, and that's what I wanted. So now when I went for that three-month retreat, mainly I had spent a year travelling in South America, Brazil, Chile and Bolivia and also I was disillusioned.

Elise: I've done that, I know that feeling.

Bhante: Yes, you eat the best food in the restaurant, you see parks and museums, you do everything, and at the end of the day, you are in a little corner in your room room saying, "What's life all about?" So when I went to meditate for three months, my teacher was Joseph Goldstein. Yes, in 1999 he was my teacher and he was interviewing me and I was asking him so many questions. So, I started sorting out my life, but still my thoughts were there "Go back and become a course director in Florida and become the best diver in the world and teach instructors." But at the end of the day, I would be very sad. So slowly I started giving up the life, and then there's one sutta that I had discussed in the Buddha's teaching- that is to say that if you heap all your bones, all your bones, since you lived from all your past lives, all the bones - he said that your bones are more than the Himalayas, can you imagine? That means you've been everything. I concluded everything. I've been a scuba diver; I've been a king; I've been a queen; I've been a mother; I've even been a lawyer. What else am I

looking for? I mean, can you imagine if they heap all your bones from your past life, they'll be bigger than mountains of the Himalaya.

I knew how the mountain looked, so, why was I struggling to become a scuba instructor and all the other things. So now that I've begun studying to become a monk I looked at my life, I reviewed my life and thought, wow, I've been enjoying these things in Thailand and everything. Now if I become an instructor again I will be replicating the same lifestyle. Let me try one thing I've never been, and that is to be enlightened; and to be enlightened I would become a monk, and that was my path to enlightenment. So in short, I became a monk because I was suffering a lot. I was at a crossroads whereby the life I had lived before was hollow and empty. I wanted something satisfying.

Elise: Your story is just so fascinating. It's so interesting the trajectory and the unlikeliness of it all, you know, ending up in India and then all the opportunities. And I think it's also so powerful because it really plays out what the ancient teachings were about. Right? Like the Buddha who talked about the four noble truths, which outlined the roadmap of explaining what suffering is and where it comes from. And it's like it seems like you had a lot of good times and you enjoyed a lot, but it kind of extinguished, it just ran out. That wasn't enough to really fulfil the deep yearning for some kind of deeper meaning and fulfilment. You can have all the hotel buffets, but there was obviously something missing there. I think so many of the listeners who are hearing this conversation can probably relate to that, which is what brings a lot of us to meditation. It's like on the surface, things look good, but there's a deep, yearning for something more meaningful.

Elise: Your story is just so fascinating. It's so interesting the trajectory and the unlikeliness of it all, you know, ending up in India and then all the opportunities. And I think it's also so powerful because it really plays out what the ancient teachings were about. Right? Like the Buddha who talked about the four noble truths, which outlined the roadmap of explaining what suffering is and where it comes from. And it seems like you had a lot of good times and you enjoyed a lot, but it kind of extinguished, it just ran out. That wasn't enough to really fulfil the deep yearning for some kind of deeper meaning and fulfilment. You can have all the hotel buffets, but there was obviously something missing there. I

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Bhante: Definitely, definitely. Yes , you're right.

Elise:

And so, I wanted to ask you in the four noble truths, you know, the first - so I'm just going through this for the listeners who might not be aware of what they are - but the first one is obviously that there is suffering and this is a part of being human and it's inevitable and then there's the suffering we add on. Then the second noble truth. I wanted to ask you something about this, your perspective. So, it relates to the cause of suffering, and as far as I understand, the Buddha describes it as being this craving or clinging.

Can you speak about how you understand this? When I came upon this, it really it stumped me because I was confused about whether this means that we have to give up all desires, and that if we're not monks, if we're not renouncing everything, are we doomed to suffering - is that it? What can I hold onto still? What am I allowed to desire and what is this actual craving that does cause the suffering? Can you just free associate any thoughts about that? I know it's a big topic, and you've given lots of talks and you could talk for ten hours on it....

Bhante: Yes, actually, when I was a layperson, before I found out the truth about craving, I used to think the same way. But when I look at the teaching first I'm going to approach it from two ways because we can look at it from a number of ways, first from the teaching itself, from a philosophical point of view, and then also from my personal experience, right? So we'll take it from there. So, when you look at the Buddha, talking about craving as the cause of suffering, it's not only craving for sensual pleasure, though it's a principle cause of suffering, craving, but we should go through what the Buddha was talking about clearly. There's craving for existence, and there's craving for non-existence also. So those are three kinds of craving

that the Buddha talked about. But when people are talking about things, they seem to be hammering only on the craving for sensual pleasures.

Elise: Can you speak to what you understand is meant by the craving of existence and then the craving of non-existence, as if you're talking to a 12-year-old? I think people brush over them because everyone gets what a craving for sensual pleasure is, like a chocolate or a nice meal or a hot shower. But these other two, how do you explain how they look in everyday life?

Bhante: In everyday life it's probably always wanting things to remain permanently, that would be craving for existence. That means you want things to last forever basically, and that normally comes when you enjoy something. If you go to a restaurant, you want to go there the next day, another time, another day, another time, you think things are going to be the same. So, I think you like to continue on to enjoy the same thing forever, basically. Yes. I mean, I'm just really making it simple.

Elise: Yes, I appreciate that.

Bhante: So, in terms of non-existence - you know, I'm suffering a lot; I don't want to suffer again, but you have not removed the causes of suffering. All right? You can't have your cake and eat it at the same time. So basically in non-existence to simplify it - let's say you have suffering and you don't want it. So you want to annihilate yourself? I mean, take the example, I'm going to kill myself because I don't want to face the suffering in life. That would be the extreme one. But for 12-year-old child, I don't want to be that in that experience basically.

Elise: Pushing away ...I dont like this ...

Bhante: Yes. I don't I don't want to be in this forever. For instance, you're angry with somebody and you say I never want to see them again. Don't want to see them.... don't want them here again, you are pushing away all the experience. That's a simplistic way of looking at it, but it's more philosophical. I think it's very, very important when we come to that second noble truth to really spell it out in few ways, but also, it's more important to remember that Buddha pointed out that craving is a cause of

suffering and we have to look at the philosophical connection so that we avoid this platitude where people say “life is suffering.” No! In life there is enjoyment - Buddha never said that, Buddha was talking about the five aggregates, in other words our experience, the form, the body, feeling’s, perceptions, mental formations and the consciousness. We hold onto them, that's what causes suffering. So we need to understand it in context, because when you understand that in the context of the first noble truth, Buddha said, in short, the five aggregates are suffering. But most people say, “Oh, life is suffering.” Well, there's some enjoyment also. (Laughter)

Buddha actually wanted us to have three angles; yes, in life there is some gratification but it's little, there's too much suffering, and also we need to escape. But people come to this teaching of the Buddha and say, “Oh, life is suffering.” Buddha never said it like that. It’s people that say it like that but Buddha said there is some enjoyment in life, and if there was no enjoyment in life, people would not be hooked.

Elise: Yes exactly. Well, you wouldn't become a scuba diver teacher if there was no pleasure or enjoyment in it. Yes.

Bhante: Yes. So now we have to look at a second number two in the context of the first number two, because at the end of the first noble truth, the Buddha said “Yes, the five aggregates” - in other words our mind body experiences, we hold onto them and they lead to suffering.

Elise: So, can I just interject and just for the listeners, who might be just starting off and more secular; the five aggregates are all the elements of experience, basically. Do you want to just say what they are again?

Bhante: Mind body experiences to make it simple, but we can get down to material body, our body, you know, it’s suffering. I mean, it's changing all the time is getting older and you have to clean it all the time and all this kind of thing and you have to give it food. And then the feelings you know, our feeling pleasant unpleasant and neutral. Then perception, you know, perception keeps on changing the way we perceive the world, our view and our perception. Then mental formation is more the faith, mindfulness, greed, hatred, delusion, the generosity, loving kindness and compassion. All those things fall into that category And then the fifth one is craving. So, we hold onto those experiences and that's what suffering is.

Elise: That's really helpful. So, I mean, obviously, this is a topic that if the listeners are interested, they need to spend a lot more time exploring. But thank you for kind of bringing it down into a way that is kind of enticing for the listeners to go and explore further if they're curious. Yes, but I think this, the second noble truth is sort of the clinging in essence, this the idea that everything is always changing mind, body, world, and we are trying to hold on and cling and that is a lot of what causes the suffering.

Bhante: Yes but to put it in a better way is that we are craving for stability in what is unstable. Let's put it that way, craving for stability in what is not stable, and that difference between those two things is what we call stress and Dukkha, or suffering. But that's philosophical and I told you another another way of explaining that was from my personal experience. I was going through the philosophical part but don't forget that I told you from my experience, so the way I interpreted this is from my experience, except, you know, there's Buddha and what he taught, but there's also my experience which speaks to that.

When I was in India in 1990 I'd never seen snow, apart from the refrigerator, when I saw ice cubes, you know, so, I was interested to see snow on the newspaper; seeing snowflakes on the newspaper As a student, I used to get \$50 per month as the government of India gave scholars fifty dollars and I accepted the money because I had to go there and stay there. So, I took a bus ride, which was over four hours and I went there as I was craving to see snowflakes. When I reached there, as I was craving to see the snow. The snowflakes were everywhere, everywhere. I was so happy and in about one minute, I had quite a load on me. I mean, this was an African man who was black, in snowflakes.

The Indians were looking at me and thought I was crazy, I'm telling you. But in the next three minutes, I could not even hold my camera. I was really in excruciating pain. So, in other words, my experience is that buy one, get one free. You crave the experience, you suffer, and that's free. That's a buy one, get one free.(laughter) I'm telling you; I've never had that experience again in my life. I'm telling you I saw the connection between craving and suffering right away.

Elise: Oh, my goodness, I have to admit there was a delayed connection for me, but I just want to say it out loud to make sure I've got it right. So, it was like the craving for how amazing the snow was, but you had no idea what it was. And then the pain. You talk about the pain. Yes. It's like the burning of the snow. Right?

Bhante: Yes, it was burning, but it was very enticing. You know, I wouldn't know that because this is my first experience, because it was sunny. And the last thing I would think was that it was going to melt, I mean, to be cold because it was very sunny, and it was white flakes and I was just allowing them to go everywhere and it was melting. And I paid the price. That's why buy one, get one for free. We understand the fundamentals if we can connect and before that, if you cannot connect, we think that craving is happiness.

That's one side of the story, but also, we have to connect the other side of the story - that when you let go, there's that freedom. We need to do both. We need to connect then let go of the craving. We need to see it in our experience, not reading books, Buddha's books. Then when you let go - how much happiness you get from that experience.

Elise: So, I have asked this question to other people in conversation. So, I'm a sweet tooth. So, I often crave chocolate or ice cream or something like that. And so, the craving. Can you say how do you deal with that. How would you bring this practice to that, because people would say, "Well I want to enjoy my chocolate or my ice cream, but why can't I do that?" Do I have to let go of that?

Bhante: So basically, what you have to do? If you are interested to let go of that, you reduce slowly, slowly. Yes, maybe from five to four to three, slowly, slowly. But if you are going to increase, you might have the same experience I had in India. You maybe eat 10 chocolates, 15, so fast you have a dent in your pocket, or you have to go very soon to the dentist chair. I used to love candy but the more you eat, you lose interest actually. So, in other words, if you think that craving doesn't lead to suffering, you increase your chocolate. If you are eating five, go to a hundred and then you can see for yourself. You don't have to listen to the Buddha. Because I think it's a feeling actually. It's not the chocolate you eat. It's more that feeling you derived from the chocolate.

Elise: Yes. It's not a lasting source. Yes.

Bhante: And I think it is very important to know that actually real happiness doesn't come from so much external things, it comes from internal things. And that's what I realised as a monk. When I was on a resort what I was getting was excitement and that's what we get, the excitement. Elise, let me give you an example. Before you start craving for chocolate there is no tension, but once you start craving for a chocolate, you bring tension to your body and start planning how to get it. So now when you get it, it's not that the chocolate has brought you happiness. It's more of the release of the tension in the first place. Yes. Let's look at the release of that excitement. And as you are eating, you relieve that tension; and you think that actually happiness is like chocolate.

Elise: That's great. Thank you.

Bhante: You can test it, you can increase your chocolate and see.

Elise: Yes. I wanted to move on to maybe something a little bit more significant than my sweet tooth habits, which is the kind of important work that you're doing in Uganda. I wanted to ask you so not only did you start the first temple, the Buddhist temple to Uganda. So you're teaching meditation there. But you're also doing a lot of social activism and work of service in terms of water projects. And that's actually how you and I connected in a way, because we're obviously doing that to raise money for clean water. My first question is, if you could talk a little bit about the challenges around water that you see, for the people listening so that they understand in a very real way what this looks like. Just from your own personal experience, what are the challenges? What do you see? Why is it hard work? What's the reality for people?

Bhante: Yes, the reality for people here of course is because they don't have clean water. And I think also they may not sometimes realise that this water is not drinkable. But because of my travelling and my experience and we had them test the water in the USA and I found out the water is very important.

Most of the people in Uganda, they take water, which is not clean. They are not well educated so don't boil it. So long as they boil it. So, I see the hardships already. But even when I tried to solve this problem by giving them bores, I fundraised money from overseas - actually, Australia has already given us two boreholes, people from Sydney. So, even when I put in boreholes they don't care for them. In other words, they pump them so hard and they break them. I have had to repair them for the last 10 years. They hit it so hard that in the next few days it would break. So that was like my major challenge, and cleaning around them and all these kinds of things.

Though in the beginning I had formed a group and then we were going to take care of these things, but I would pay them. But what I wanted was for them to come to the temple and then clean around the temple compound and they did. So, I wanted to have a symbiotic relationship so they could come and do some kind of work at the temple, volunteer at the temple, and then I would repair the boreholes for them because I knew they didn't have enough money to repair it. So whenever I asked for money if it's like three thousand dollars, I would ask the donors three thousand five hundred dollars and leave 500 dollars in the bank so that when it broke I would repair it. Yes, but later on I found out that the people were irresponsible. For me, that has been the major challenge. But now it's being solved with the Local government involved.

So they're collecting at least a minimum amount, which is very very nominal. Yes, really just peanuts. But the key for me, was to bring people together so that it is communal work and communal compassion. I wanted to teach them a little compassion in action. As a new religion, people didn't know how to meditate and still don't know what we stand for. But I wanted to tell them that the teachings of the Buddha are compassion and action and wisdom. So now this kind of connecting people so that we get clean water. It was intended to get together, because when we collect water in the same place we're together, then we are responsible together to clean it. So really, for me, I came with the idea of togetherness, collecting it, forming a community, rather than just put in a water point down and get clean water.

For me, I go deeper than that so that people understand the symbolism of water and also the donors and how people donate money to alleviate the

suffering. But then at the end of the day, they've got what they want. So, for me, I wanted them to understand more deeply the teaching of compassion in action so we even talk about it.

In other words, for me, I wanted to connect the donors and the beneficiaries. Also, it goes beyond clean water, but I'm still working on it. You know we have about 1000 people, that we give clean water to. One thousand people are given boreholes for schools. So, my intention is to keep onto this project because it's more about the teaching that behind this borehole and water it's important to care for their health, so that they have good health. It is understanding deeply how we as Africans can come together, because during olden times we used to go and clean wells and there were drums, which called the community to come together. They dug the road together. They would come to dig and work together. But with the modern life, this has disintegrated. So, people care for themselves, just having a faucet and tap in their house and then they get clean water and don't care about their neighbour. That part of bringing the community together is still a work in progress. And of course, we now introduced other things. When I found out that water wasn't going to bring people together, I formed other projects like Women Empowerment Project so that they come and cook together and other things.

Elise: So, that that brings me to the next question, which is around the intersection of meditation and mindfulness and social action which we were both excited to talk about. So, what are your thoughts on that relationship? And maybe you can speak from your own personal perspective how you see the practice of mindfulness and meditation as supporting social action.

Bhante: Yes, actually, Elise when I was trying become a Buddhist monk, I thought that I would be teaching the way my teacher taught and most of my practice had been in the USA where they teach mindfulness to become calm and they do a retreat and all these things. But later on, when I started the temple here, I had to develop a different template, not so much replicating what other mindfulness teachers were doing. But for me, I was really going where the rubber hits the pavement, really with the people in the society introducing Buddhism, you know.

So, I used to hear about monks doing social work, especially in Sri Lanka. Wow, those people, they're just cutting back on their practice, you know. In other words, I had to divide it. I had a wide corridor between mindfulness and social activity. But from my experience, I found the more I meditated, especially with mindfulness, I would find out, that one thing is paying attention to my own experience with suffering or pain, and also paying attention to the other peoples suffering and both. So, in other words, I finally started understanding the Sutta where when you practise mindfulness according to the four foundations of mindfulness, you have to be aware internally of your own experience and externally to other people's experience and then both.

That covers pretty much everything. That's what meditation is about. It's not about breathing in breathing out. We are not balloons are we? (laughter) Breathing in and breathing out. Actually, it brings some attention to what's going on inside you. Now I would go to another meditation which was taught by the Sharon Salzberg, it is called metta, lovingkindness. I was so used to Vipassana meditation and mindfulness. By the way I was on staff at IMS- different teachers were coming in. One day Sharon was teaching a course on metta. I didn't want to attend, but later on I was pulled again to understand deeply the practice of metta - loving kindness and compassion. Then I found out that in that practice is what you call connection. So, you connect with yourself and then with other, with the society. In other words, what we are doing in metta lovingkindness meditation, we are actually building.

We are building more connection with the rest of the world. To put it in a better way, we are breaking fences around us and we are building bridges, so that practice is about building bridges and dismantling our fences physically and psychologically and all this kind of thing. So now the connection is here. While mindfulness meditation will bring attention to myself and others and never the societal environment, and metta loving kindness and compassion will bring a connection with myself and others and both. I found out that meditation is social activism at rest and social activism is actually a meditation in action.

Elise: Wow, that's so stunning.

Bhante: Shall I repeat this - Meditation is social activism at rest. Social activism is meditation in action. So, in other words, it doesn't matter where you start, but you should maintain a very good balance. Yes, we don't want to get carried away.

Elise: Yes. So that's good. You just spoke to that point about meditation being social activism at rest. You were talking about this sense of how lovingkindness in these meditations can create or break down the fences and create a greater sense of connection and possibly also responsibility or interconnectedness and therefore seeing how your actions can make a difference. But, like for me, what also comes up is needing to attend to yourself in that action and just, I guess, retaining your balance because you can get lost in the action and then, you know, quite frankly, I've experienced it myself and got burnt out and then that's too much of the action and not enough of the 'at rest.' Just to look after yourself. I think Sharon Salzberg, who I've interviewed for this program as well, who's book *Real Change* speaks a lot about that, that the people who are doing a lot of action in the world have that have that risk of burn out and finding that balance.

Bhante: Yes, that's called compassion fatigue. Many writers talk about it. So, the balance is very important because when you look at it, when you meditate actually, you can't help but be moved and have that basis for a mission to really help others in order to translate your meditation from cushion to off cushion and then to act, and not forget your practice. So, there must be a very fine balance between the two. So, we need to hold both. So that you don't forget because I've seen it myself actually. Many times, when you're getting engaged in the social activism and you don't go back to meditate and have a formal meditation, what would happen? You are going to really get edgy, you know, moody, and especially when people you are helping, they are doing the reverse. You see you can't do everything, both ends of the candle and really help everybody- and people just abuse you and take advantage of your generosity, you know. People either do nothing or fight you when you're helping them. So if you don't have enough meditation, to contain that, then you are going to suffer a lot.

So, it's very very important, especially on the other side of social activism, to really put in a dose of compassion and meditation and wisdom basically. Because we need compassion and wisdom together, and

nobody should tell you that, “OK, that’s not not for me,” that they don't meditate. No, no. You should be able to meditate because as you are doing it, I call it meditation in action. If you are just doing it because people are poor and you see it as a cure and you know, learning from it then maybe. But if you're doing it from a Buddhist point of view, from a meditative point of view, social activism shouldn't feed you into the system, you should get your energy and feed into the system.

When I'm walking from the temple, OK, I'll leave the temple, I see people carrying water on their head from the borehole. I'm filled with joy, and that joy brings a meditation stance you know, whereby you can even go back to meditate and feel a bit lighter. You know, when you're meditating and just fighting with your breath and all, you want to catch your breath so that you can concentrate, maybe you don't have joy, but for me, I've already put in at least a little bit of dose of joy. I might go to my meditation seeing more happy people, whose suffering is reduced. That's why I see the connections.

Elise: I really, love the way that you put that the two poles of meditation in social action. As we come to the end of our conversation, I wondered if I could ask you a couple of questions that are more specific around meditation itself. So, you've taught a lot of people how to meditate and you've supported that practice. Have you got anything to say around meditation as a habit? People find it really difficult to do this, to bring this into their lives regularly. Do you have any advice or what have you noticed that you'd like to say about that for the listeners?

Elise: Yes, actually, I have even written a book called Drop by Drop, because people asked me this question many times when I taught in Brazil, and around the world. And there was a recurrent question, yes, this teacher has been very good at this, but how can they do it in their life? So that really prompted me to write a book about it, Drop by Drop. But in simple terms, if we really want to apply meditation into our life - how did you start brushing your teeth and not miss miss a single day? That's the question? Even if we don't have toothpaste in African villages, but still we have to use a stick. Now, once somebody can answer that question, especially for those who have this universal mantra that they don't have time to meditate, ask those people. How did they start brushing their teeth? Such a habit developed slowly, but you find out that when someone found the reason

why they brush their teeth, they'll give the same reason why they need to meditate. You brush your teeth because if you don't brush your teeth, you are going to have issues. So, you're going to have issues in the tissues (laughter) and you're going to smell. Other people are going to say, hey, go and brush your teeth, you know.

Elise: I mean, you're going to have pain down the line.

Bhante: Yes, sooner or later basically. I think we can extend that. Why do you take a shower every day?

Elise: Well, maybe not in Africa, where I had showers in the freezing cold water which wasn't as fun or as pleasurable as having warm showers in Melbourne. But it is different because sometimes having a shower is maybe a nice thing, whereas sometimes meditating isn't nice. It feels really hard, especially if you've been running around in your hectic life, to sit down is quite an unpleasant feeling, actually. Sometimes it's quite agitating if you come in contact with that agitation.

Bhante: Yes. Yes you're right. We need to brush our teeth so that we keep them clean so that we avoid future suffering. If they have to go to the dentist when they all have what you call.... tartare.

Elise: Yes, the cavities or whatever.

Bhante: Cavities yes. So now moving on to those people who want to make meditation as a habit, one has to realise what's the purpose of meditation. What's the purpose of meditation? The purpose of meditation is to purify the mind from greed, hatred and delusion.

People who don't want to keep a regular practice, they have a different purpose of meditation. They think meditation is to make the mind a vacuum, without thoughts, that's what they think about. So now when they go to meditate, the mind is full of thoughts and then they give up. People think that the purpose of meditation is to drain our mind of thoughts - no thoughts. No! The purpose of meditation is to clean our mind and what are we cleaning? We are cleaning greed and delusion and all our psychic irritants. Yes... All hindrances, all obstacles.

So now if we look at meditation as a purification process, we should not get discouraged. We should develop a habit, it's just like maybe cleaning your house. When you are cleaning your house, you must make it a habit. You don't want to spend two years without cleaning your house, because if you do then the day you go to clean it, you have to clean it many, many times. But if you clean it regularly and develop a habit, you don't have to have to spend the whole day calling your neighbours to help. But it has to be gradual.

Elise: And what do you think about, obviously you chose the path of being a monk and that comes with more opportunity to meditate. Maybe you're busy doing action and doing work as well, but what do you tell people? What's your perspective about how long you need to practice for? That's always a common question that comes up as well. How would you answer that?

Bhante: Ok, now I would answer this question basically like this, because as a monk, I'm not on a cushion meditating all the time. Many times, I'm off cushion, but still meditating. So now once we understand one definition it will answer that question. What is meditation? Most people ask this question. How long should we meditate because they have skipped that - what is meditation? If they answer this properly according to what I know of Buddhism -because the Pali word for meditation is Bhavana, which means mental development, mental cultivation. So now we can rephrase the question, how long should we give up on my Saturdays and Sundays? The answer is all the time, except when you're fast asleep.

This should be an ongoing process. I used to think like this when I just became a monk. I used to meditate two hours, one hour, 45 minutes. I got the definition of meditation wrong because most people, when they talk about meditation, they have a connotation of a cushion and sitting there. Meditation means mental development; in Pali it is Bhavana. So, in other words, we should meditate all the time, except when, we are fast asleep. That means we should be aware of our thoughts, we should be aware of our mind state, and we are aware of the side of generous lovingkindness and meditation.

That's why when I teach, at the end of the retreat I tell the people, especially some of you, you know, when you are driving in Melbourne

and then there's the traffic light. Then you are looking up at your eyelashes and your hair and you put on that lipstick. And I said you should also have a template of actually a small paper and you put on it loving kindness, compassion, wisdom, generosity, loving kindness. So, you have a template of one side of the mind and the template on the other side of the mind. So, after doing your hair, and what you were doing, then try to look at where you are at this moment.

And that's what mindfulness is about, knowing what's going on the present moment. That's the definition of mindfulness, at least from my book. So, we should really kind of take care of the body with lipstick and the like. No, we should also take a moment to think, "Now where's my mind let me take a moment with my mind." There's a lot of fear right now, or hatred or anger that could be on one side. So, you can actually really look at where you are at that moment. This is a reality check - where's my mind right now? In your body, you follow your body, but you find that your body needs more lipstick. You know, so just say, OK, now let me have my at least an iota of loving kindness, and compassion. So, this should take place all the time and not be not scheduled. However, if you want to ask the question, when should we and for how long should you do formal meditation. You have to qualify that word meditation and add the word formal onto meditation. Then I would answer differently, I would say it's better to build from maybe one minute to two-minute, three minute and continuing building and not doing it once for three hours and then you wait until Christmas comes. (Laughter)

For me, building on it is much better as you like, as fits you, because different people, different program. What I say is that Buddha never put a standard on how long you should meditate in the Tibetan Buddhist scriptures. I don't find it in the scripture at all. It's up to you. That's why I want to take this stance as I told you about mental development, that anytime you get time, it's like breathing. How long should you breathe? Ok, Elise, here's a question. How long should you breathe?

Elise: Every day. Yes.(laughter)

Bhante: You breathe. So, for me, that's how important it is- do you see? Let me tell you, the importance of meditation actually - Buddha said that it's better to spend 24 hours on one day in a meditative state than to live a hundred

years without meditation. So, can you see the time scale of the teaching and the practice, you know.

Elise: Can you say that again?

Bhante: It's better to live one day - and this is in the Dhammapada - it's better to live one day in meditation. So, one day is 24 hours isn't it, in a meditative state than to live your life a hundred years without meditating. We find that in the scripture. So now you can spend one day, 24 hours. So, it's so important. That's why I would not want to leave it. Yes, because how important it is, I would take time if I put in five minutes, 10 minutes from time to time. Because it is so important. So important. We don't find find this in scripture.

Elise: So, it's not, there's no rule, there's no prescription. But I really think the way that you've broken that down is so is so helpful. And I want to just ask you, you know, you talked about earlier on with your whole path that it was like it was at that three-month retreat, that something really shifted for you. And I know for me it wasn't until I actually went into a longer retreat that I felt something that then led me to understand that, then led me to be more committed to the practice. So, is there anything to say about that for people who are listening? I know what you're saying, that you can build it one minute at a time to whatever is right. But do you think that there is something about going on a retreat, a silent retreat and committing to that that is helpful on the path?

Bhante: Yes, it's not until I went on a retreat that I touched that depth. What I yearn and all these things, and I never want that to go out of the window. So for me daily practices are very important. But it's like warming water, warming water. You keep on warming it. It doesn't reach the boiling point. So, you need at some stage to boil your water to reach the boiling point. So, we need to boil our practice by going on a longer retreat. Preferably, I don't know how long it should be, but you should rearrange your life to make sure that you really go for a long retreat because on a longer to treat, it helps you to settle down. But of course, also that depends on how much you've been doing in daily life. That will help you to have a kickstart right when you go on a longer retreat. So, everything matters. We need both.

We need small moments, but many, many of them, but also, we need really to boil our practice so that it reaches the boiling point, and you really know what our pain looks like in a sustainable way, how emotions, emotional pain and so many things that on a longer retreat come up. A lot of stuff comes up. But of course, the good news that we have support. You don't want to stop a lot of stuff. You can't just keep on going for one month two months or three months. And so, because we have responsibilities at home, we should get a balance. And that's why I think getting an experienced friend and speak to your friend to share your experience so that you don't really get carried away. It's very important because after that for me from the long retreat, I started committing myself to the practice. I did a practice because I can give you this tip about people who want to develop a habit, If you want to develop a habit, do it for a minimum of two weeks of a commitment.

After that, if you don't do something you need even a reminder. That's what I did with yoga. Even if I don't have time, I do one exercise, which you call Surya namaste. Even if I don't have time, I do it once. And if I don't do it, there's something that comes to my mind that I've not done something. That happened today actually. Today, I missed my yoga and I felt that something was missing. So, then I was about to take breakfast I said at least go and do one exercise. So, we want meditation to be like that, something which reminds us. By the way, there is a very common saying in mindfulness circles that mindfulness is not difficult to practise, but what is difficult is to remember to be mindful so please put signs all over your place.

But when I was teaching Mississippi, somebody told me, "Oh, I put signs that say to meditate." So, I said, "Now put another sign to remember to read the sign." So simply put we actually need to work on how to develop a habit, and for me what I did, when I was staying in the monastery and I'm a monk and I was saying that I'm not meditating formal meditation every day. What I did, I put my cushion near my bed so that before I got to my bed, I would step on it, and when I got up from my bed, I would step on it and then I would feel very bad about it. So now what I did, I got a clock which rings every one hour. It will ring, like the alarm would remind me it's time to take a deep breath. Every one hour throughout the day, I would get to the reminder and I would not switch it off until I take

a deep breath. I would do what you call an M and M, a meditation a minute. These are sweets right?

Elise: Yes. M and M's

Bhante: Because when I was in the monastery I was the retreat manager and it was taking over.

Elise: Hectic, yes.

Bhante: Yes. I was thinking I became a monk to meditate and become enlightened. Why am I in a monastery and I'm not really going for my formal meditation. My cushion is collecting dust.

Elise: I feel like that is such a great place to end because, I think it gives all of us a lot of comfort to know that even a monk in monastery has to put a cushion down to make sure that he literally trips over his meditation cushion. So, I think that gives us all a lot of comfort to know that we're not alone in the struggle to really commit to the practice.

Bhante: Yes. So that's what I can say, is my parting words, to keep feeding your mind with meditation and of course eat good food, eat well, and also don't forget to meditate because it's the food for your mind. Thank you very much.

Elise: Thank you so much Bhante. It's been a pleasure. Thank you so much.